



# NetNews

an online newsletter devoted to adult literacy

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LDA of Minnesota

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## Testing Accommodations

LDA of Minnesota receives many calls and emails regarding testing accommodations for large-scale testing programs. Callers include the test-takers themselves, parents, teachers, counselors, advocates, and an occasional attorney. The standardized tests they ask about include the GED, SAT and ACT (for college application), LSAT (for law school entry), MSAT (for medical school entry), or PRAXIS (for teacher licensure). Most express frustration and even exasperation over how difficult it is to receive approval for testing accommodations. Many have tried numerous times to pass these tests, scored poorly or failed, been assessed for a disability, and/or requested what they consider to be reasonable testing accommodations, but their requests are not approved. "If only I (or they) had a little more time... or a calculator... or a reader...."

### WHAT MAKES IT SO DIFFICULT TO RECEIVE ACCOMMODATIONS FOR LARGE-SCALE TESTING?

Understanding the answer(s) to this question requires some background knowledge in standardized testing programs and procedures. Therefore, the purpose of this issue is to build essential background knowledge in standardized testing programs along with specific information about GED, CASAS, and TABE – the large-scale tests required by Minnesota Adult Basic Education.

The format is FAQ with answers from GED, CASAS, and TABE websites and Minnesota ABE state staff. The questions, key vocabulary terms, and important statements are in bold.

### WHAT IS LARGE-SCALE, STANDARDIZED TESTING?

Large-scale, standardized tests are constructed of items that are leveled in difficulty and fit a pre-planned table of content specifications (such as GED subjects or CASAS life skills). The tests are administered according to defined directions and under the same conditions for all examinees. They also include specific materials (such as test booklets and answer sheets) and scoring procedures.

As accountability expectations increase, it is important for ABE providers to understand what they can and can't do for test-takers and why.

The number of correct items on a standardized test is considered a **raw score**. The raw score may be used to determine **derived scores** pertaining to a norm group, or members of a specific group, such as same-age peers. Examples of derived scores are stanines, standard scores, composite scores, index scores, percentiles, and grade equivalents.



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5354 Parkdale Drive, Suite 200 ■ St. Louis Park, MN 55416  
(952) 922-8374 ■ [www.ldaminnesota.org](http://www.ldaminnesota.org)  
Learning Disabilities Association of Minnesota

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## HOW ARE GED, CASAS, AND TABE TESTS SCORED?

For the GED tests, raw scores are used to derive **standard scores**, which are scaled based on the performance of high school seniors. GED standard scores range from a minimum of 200 to a maximum of 800 on each test. To pass, the GED candidate must receive standard scores that meet or surpass those of approximately 60% of high school seniors.

For the **CASAS and TABE**, raw scores are used to derive **scale scores**, which are organized units on a single scale with intervals of equal size. The scale can be applied to groups regardless of their characteristics or the time of the year. It allows comparisons among examinees and between pre- and post-test scores in ways that are statistically valid.

**It is important for ABE providers to understand that large-scale, standardized tests require that all examinees perform under the same conditions.** However, by federal law, they must also be inclusive of persons with disabilities who may benefit from accommodations in order to demonstrate more accurately their abilities and skills.

## WHAT ARE DISABILITIES?

Disabilities are any restrictions or lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.

In the K-12 system, the federal categories of disabilities determined by the **Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEA)**, as amended in 2004, include specific learning disability, developmental cognitive disability, speech and language impairment, emotional or behavioral disorder, autism spectrum disorder, blind-visually impaired, deaf and hard of hearing, and other health impaired. Students must qualify for placement and special education service (including modifications and accommodations) according to procedures and criteria established at the state level.

**Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973** and the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990** have provisions related to testing accommodations for adult learners with disabilities. Local agencies (such as ABE consortia and programs) are responsible for providing accessible services – including testing. Adult learners with disabilities are responsible for providing documentation of their disability at the time of intake or registration or after diagnosis in order to request and receive reasonable instructional and testing accommodations.

## WHAT DISABILITIES DOES GED RECOGNIZE?

**GED Testing Service (GEDTS)** believes “not all individuals can be fairly tested under standard administrations of regular print editions of the GED tests. In cases, accommodated administrations may be arranged at the request of the candidate and with the approval of the Chief Examiner and GED Administrator.” GEDTS provides accommodation request forms for the following categories of documented disabilities:

- . Learning disabilities or other cognitive disabilities
- . Physical/chronic health disabilities
- . Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder
- . Mental health disabilities

**It is important for GED instructors, professional diagnosticians, certifying advocates, and GED candidates to understand that GEDTS has established its own definition for determining learning or other cognitive disabilities.**

This definition includes: (1) the ability to pass the GED Tests; (2) a significant processing deficit that substantially limits his or her potential to demonstrate that ability on the tests; and (3) substantial impairment of educational achievement (such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, or dysgraphia) not primarily due to mental retardation, emotional factors, or cultural factors. Only certain standardized tests and scores are accepted by GEDTS to determine LD or other cognitive disabilities and they are listed on the required request form.

## WHAT IS CONSIDERED ACCEPTABLE DOCUMENTATION OF A DISABILITY?

Documentation of any disability must be in writing. Self, parent, or spouse report is not adequate! The provisions of IDEA are applicable only up to the 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday of a person who meets disability categorical criteria and is still enrolled in high school; therefore, Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) are not adequate alone as documentation for most adults over 21, although they may support other documentation.

Examples of acceptable documentation for adults include current (within 3-5 years) medical reports, neurological, psychological, or psycho-educational evaluation reports, or clinical records – signed and dated by certified or licensed professionals or diagnosticians who are qualified in the particular area of disability.

## WHAT ARE ACCOMMODATIONS?

Accommodations are legal and reasonable adjustments in procedures to accommodate a documented area of disability. Appropriate accommodations meet the needs of the person with a documented disability without changing what the test is supposed to measure.

CTB/McGraw-Hill, publisher of the TABE, has developed three categories of accommodations. According to their publication *Guidelines for Inclusive Test Administration* (2005), they are the following:

**Category 1 accommodations can be provided to any examinee because they will not change the test, administration, or interpretation.** TABE includes testing in a private or alternate space and the use of a color overlay as Category 1. CASAS also considers these accommodations allowable for any examinee and adds extra time, supervised breaks, and a sign language interpreter for test directions only.

GEDTS considers only the large print version, the use of colored overlays, highlighters, post-it notes, earplugs, straight-edge, and magnifying glass to be accommodations not requiring prior approval.

**Category 2 accommodations may change examinee performance and should be considered when interpreting scores.** CTB/McGraw includes extra time under this category and recommends that test scores be interpreted in light of this accommodation.

**Category 3 accommodations will need prior approval based on a documented area of disability because they change the test, administration, and interpretation.** Category 3 accommodations require prior approval from the testing company or designated representative.

**GEDTS** requires prior approval from the GED Administrator to provide any of the following accommodations:

- Extended time (1.5-2.0 times)
- Audiocassette edition
- Braille edition
- Use of a scribe (with guidelines from GEDTS)
- Use of a calculator for Part II
- Use of a talking calculator
- Use of a private room
- Use of an interpreter
- Supervised frequent breaks
- Others for special cases clearly documented by certifying professionals

**It is important for ABE providers to understand that there must be a reasonable “match” between the area impacted by the learning disability and the requested GED accommodation.** For example, if a reading disability is documented, appropriate accommodations may include extended time, the audiocassette edition, and use of a private room. If a writing disability is documented, the use of a scribe and a private room would be appropriate – but perhaps only on the writing test. In order for approval of a calculator for Part II, a math disability (or dyscalculia) must be diagnosed.

## WHAT IS LDA'S ROLE IN THE PROCESS FOR REQUESTING OR RECEIVING GED ACCOMMODATIONS?

LDA staff are professional diagnosticians who can provide assessment, reporting, and completion of GED accommodation request forms (when appropriate) for ABE learners at no cost.

LDA diagnostic assessments include:

1. Statewide **learning disability (LD) assessments** for learners (ABE, GED, and intermediate/advanced ESL) seeking documentation of LD and/or GED accommodations.
2. Metro **attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) assessments** for learners (ABE or GED) seeking documentation of ADHD and/or GED accommodations.

Referral for LDA assessment is initiated by ABE providers. Most consortia have designated a manager or instructor as the "LDA assessment contact." This person has received the one-form *Minnesota Adult Basic Education Screening and Assessment Application*. The referring ABE provider and learner complete the form and submit it to LDA. Following review and acceptance, testing appointments will be scheduled at LDA, or at the ABE site for two or more referrals.

In addition, LDA staff may review other documentation of a learning disability and complete the GED form (again, if appropriate) as certifying advocates. The review may result in a recommendation for further assessment if the existing test data does not meet GEDTS requirements.

## SO...WHAT MAKES IT SO DIFFICULT TO RECEIVE ACCOMMODATIONS FOR LARGE-SCALE TESTING?

In summary, it is difficult to receive accommodations because large-scale tests are to be used in a standard manner to ensure **validity**, or the capability of a test to measure what it is intended to measure. There is also the issue of **fairness**, in that "standardization" implies all examinees should be tested in the same way - unless it is clearly documented that to do so would be unfair. Under several federal acts, reasonable accommodations are available in order to be fair and inclusive; however, most accommodations require documentation of a disability and the process for requesting and receiving approval can be time-consuming.

According to Jim Colwell, Minnesota GED Administrator, "If a disability or impairment is clearly presented and documented by professionals, most GED accommodation requests will be approved."

This information may not ease the frustration or exasperation of ABE test-takers or ABE test administrators. But it is the reality of our educational world today and not limited to the large-scale tests we have to use or the adult learners we want to serve. They will encounter similar standardized testing programs in the public schools their children attend and in the post-secondary settings they may attend in the future.

IF YOU HAVE ANY OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT LDA ASSESSMENT, LITERACY COACHING, PRACTITIONER RESEARCH AND CIRCLES, PLEASE CONTACT MARN FRANK: [mf@ldaminnesota.org](mailto:mf@ldaminnesota.org).